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# **FROM BUKOVINA TO MOGHILEV AND BEYOND**

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT BY A TRANSNISTRIA  
SURVIVOR

(Including an epilogue)

BY

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# **CONTENTS**

	PAGE
01. SYNOPSIS	3
02. BACKGROUND: VIJNITZ/BUKOVINA	4
03. MY CHILDHOOD	6
04. THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING.... (1940)	8
05. THE NAZIS ARE COMING... (1941)	9
06. TRANSNISTRIA LABOR CAMPS (1941 - 1944)	10
07. LIBERATION. RETURN TO CZERNOVITZ	17
08. REFUGEES IN ROMANIA (1946)	20
09. WELCOME TO ISRAEL (1949)	21
10. LIFE IN AMERICA (SINCE 1956)	24



Mark Modechai Koller, age 7, with his older brother Dov, age 11, and his parents, Dr. Israel Koller and Anna Koller. The picture was taken in Vijnitz, Bukovina, Romania in 1938.

## **01. SYNOPSIS**

Imagine being a 10-year-old kid from a nice middle-class family, professional parents, an older brother, a piano and a cat named Mitzi.... You are steeped in excelling at school, taking private piano lessons, going to Cheider and enjoying life itself. Then suddenly, in a matter of hours, your life is shattered. You can no longer attend school, have possessions, or talk to your neighbors. One day, your family is ordered to leave your house behind, and move into a crowded ghetto. You suddenly lose all privacy and there is hardly any food to eat. This is just the beginning of many years of misery, disease, punishment and deprivation. The saga continues with a miraculous rebirth, followed by the long road to becoming a productive member of society.

## **02. BACKGROUND: VIJNITZ/BUKOVINA**

Vijnitz - a beautiful shtetl on the foothills of the Eastern Carpathian Mountains was famous for its picturesque beauty, its proximity to Galizia (Poland) and its intense Jewish atmosphere. It was the seat of the saintly Hager rabbinical dynasty and a great center of Jewish life.

The Vijnitzer Shul was an imposing building in baroque style with huge pane glass windows and four towers at each corner. Adjoining the Shul was a special building to house the students of the Yeshiva and provide them with comfortable accommodations. The Vijnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Israel Hager, was famous throughout the region. Students flocked to his Yeshiva from all over the Habsburg Empire. Due to the Rabbi's fame, Vijnitz had a reputation far greater than its geographical size. Ellie Wiesel, in his autobiographical book "All Rivers Run To The Sea" devotes four pages to his encounter with the Vijnitzer Rebbe. Wiesel was then a youngster, but his impressions from the meeting were enormous.

Under the Habsburg rule in the 19th century, this shtetl, as well as the whole region called Bukovina was thriving both culturally and economically. Its last ruler, Kaiser Frantz-Joseph was especially kind to the Jews. This was the eastern outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, until its fall in 1918. Just before World War II more than 278,000 Jews lived in northern Bukovina and Bessarabia then part of Romania, and comprised one third of the population of its capital Czernowitz. The general population was a polyglot made up of Swabians or Schwaben (who spoke German), Ruthenes (who spoke Ukrainian) and Hutsuls, semi-nomadic mountain people (who spoke a Ukrainian dialect).

Bukovina was awarded to Romania at the end of World War I, at the treaty of Versailles (1919), and a new culture; a new language and new laws were introduced to this region. Nevertheless, the bond

between the Jews of Bukovina and those of Austria and Galizia were strong and Jews traveled freely in those areas until World War II. Especially frequent were the trips between Bukovina and Vienna and vice versa. As a matter of fact, Bukovina was referred to as "little Vienna" (klein Wien). Jews from Vienna flocked to the Vijnitz area in the summer, because of its bucolic beauty, the Ceremush River, the Carpathian Mountains and the fresh and clear air. Just a short walk across the bridge over the river was the town of Kossow - in Galizia.

My father, Israel Koller (nicknamed Susiu), earned his Doctorate degree in Law at the University of Cernauti, the Romanian name for the Austrian Czernovitz, then the capital of Romanian Bukovina.

My mother, Anna Koller nee. Haberman and her parents vacationed regularly in an adjoining resort for their summer vacation. My father met my mother on one such visit. They fell in love and decided to get married (in 1923). My mother was then only 18 years old. She had just finished High School and was a graduate of the Culinary Institute of Vienna. My father, 27 years of age, was already a prosperous lawyer. It was quite a change for my mother to move from the big cosmopolitan city of Vienna to this small town in Bukovina, but she managed to make the transition quite successfully. Meanwhile, my father's practice grew by leaps and bounds, for he was designated the principal attorney for the Vijnitzer Rebbe's Court and the Yeshiva.

As a prosperous couple with power and influence in the Judicial Courts and with the Rebbe, my parents became socially active, entertaining and being entertained. Our home became a meeting place for judges, lawyers, doctors and musicians. On many of these occasions my parents would entertain and play classical music, my mother playing the piano and my father playing the violin. My parents were also socially active in many local charities and organizations.

My mother gained quite a reputation as an expert baker of Viennese delights, excelling in such delicacies as kremshnitte, apfelstrudel and gugelhupf. Additionally, her knitted wool sweaters were the talk of the town. She found knitting and needlepoint very relaxing. She was also an avid reader of classical literature (in German). We lived in a beautiful duplex apartment on Main Street, practically around the corner from the beautiful Vijnitzer Shul and within walking distance to the courthouse. My father's law office was on the ground floor. My grandfather, BenZion Koller, was part of the office staff and served as office manager.

### **03. MY CHILDHOOD**

Two children were born to this prosperous middle class couple, both boys. My brother Dov (nicknamed Berti) was born in 1927 in Vienna, and I was born in 1931 in Vijnitz. My official (Romanian) name was Marcel, my Hebrew name Mordechai and my nickname Marzi. Later in life I acquired two additional first names.

My parents took excellent care of us, in addition to which we had a terrific nanny. Her name was Paraska. She was a very kind Ruthene woman. In addition to my brother and to Paraska, we had a beautiful cat named Mitzi. Many of my scratches came from this crazy animal which I loved and liked to tease.

Holidays were spent at my grandparents' house. My grandparents BenZion and Fanie Koller who had five children lived in nearby Vijenka, an extension of Vijnitz, situated on the River Ceremush. My grandparents owned a house with a big garden, and we would all go there to pick walnuts. One of my favorite pastimes with my nine cousins was to crack nuts and eat them. We would also watch my grandparents make powidla, that is plum jam with a special flavor... They would stew the plums in a huge cauldron on a bonfire. All the kids would then assist in filling up tens of jars of powidla for the



winter, and do some licking in the process. Occasionally, we would go to the river and attempt to swim. The Ceremush was a relatively small river. At other times we would link up with neighborhood kids and play soccer - the most popular sport.

In the winter we went sleigh riding, usually on the hilly road to Storojinetz - the regional center of government, or stay indoors and play either Ping-Pong or "indoor soccer". This "indoor soccer" game was quite unique. It was played with buttons on the kitchen table or on the floor. The game conformed exactly to the regulations of professional soccer, with eleven well-chosen buttons forming a team. A shirt button would usually serve as the ball, which was manipulated by the "team's owner" with the assistance of a large flat button. There was a fierce competition to acquire the most suitable buttons for the different positions of an imaginary soccer team, i.e. a large button to serve as the "goalie", etc. That created a demand for especially large or otherwise suitable buttons, and started a whole craze of trading buttons at school or of cutting them off the coats of unaware guests...

On the High Holy Days we attended services at the Vijnitzer Shul together with my father and grandfather. My grandfather was a Chassid of the Vijnitzer Rebbe. He had a long and distinguished white beard and was considered a very righteous person among his peers. Both my father and my grandfather would frequently be given honors in Shul on these occasions.

Sometimes we traveled with mother to Vienna to visit our grandparents on mother's side - Abraham and Rivka Haberman. My grandfather was a prosperous haberdasher in his own business. He loved to spoil us. In Vienna we would always have the greatest time! What stands out in my mind are visits to the Praater, a most beautiful Amusement Park dominated by a giant Riesenrad, i.e. a gigantic Ferris wheel. Since our parents were musically inclined, both my brother and I were taught to play musical

instruments. My brother learned to play the violin, and I had just started to learn the piano at the age of eight. My teacher was Fraulein Hoenich, a pretty redhead pianist.

Naturally, I attended the public school and the Cheider. The public school was a strict Romanian school. Luckily I was a good student and was not slapped on the palms of the hands with a ruler, as was the custom in those days. By the time I was nine, I was fluent in Romanian, German (my mother tongue), Yiddish and some Hebrew. This idyllic picture of shtetl life was suddenly shattered as the following events started to unfold.

#### **04. THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING... (1940)**

In June of 1940, I was propelled into a fast-forward maturation mode. Romania (with German acquiescence) was forced to cede the Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. Russian troops marched in without any resistance. King Carol II of Romania turned to Hitler for protection, but Germany was too preoccupied in the West. The Soviet Army committed high scale looting. The Russian soldiers seemed to have been deprived of material things in general, and of alcohol, watches and cigarettes in particular. When order was finally restored, any wealthy individual was pegged a "capitalist", a Zionist or a bourgeois and deported to Siberia. Thousands were deported, mostly Jews. My father, luckily, managed to evade that list, but we continued to live in fear. In September of 1940, all school-age children were ordered to repeat the same grade. So I had the dubious pleasure of repeating the third grade, this time in a Russian school. The emphasis was not only on the Russian language, but also on the merits of Communism, and their then illustrious leader Stalin. The Russian occupation brought with it a complete culture shock to all the residents of Bukovina, and especially to the Jews. Practicing religion was viewed as an anti-revolutionary act and could have brought on incarceration and/or deportation to Siberia. The mood was pensive. People had hoped

for a change, but the change that came was for the worse. There was a certain sense of uncertainty in the air bordering on terror. People were afraid to go to bed, not knowing whether they'll hear a knock at the door in the middle of the night and be awakened and deported for no particular reason. My father was no longer permitted to practice law and found a job as a clerk at the local hospital.

#### **05. THE NAZIS ARE COMING.... (1941)**

On June 22, 1941, Hitler turned his wrath against the Russians. The Romanians joined in eleven days later. Romania was ruled by Marshal Ion Antonescu, a puppet of the Germans. Antonescu received his political backing from a reactionary group, the Iron Guards. Inspired by the Germans, the Romanians joined the war against the Soviet Union and the drive to the East. This was the beginning of the Dark Age for the Jewry of Bukovina, Bessarabia and the Ukraine.

When the Russian troops withdrew from Vijnitz they created a vacuum that was quickly filled by roving Fascist bands. What followed was a **Pogrom**. For seven days these thugs terrorized the Jewish population. The landscape soon changed into one of swastikas all over town. Scores of Jews were murdered, and the beards and earlocks of many were shorn. Jewish businesses and Jewish properties were looted and destroyed. Many acts of violence were also committed. Fraulein Hoenich, my redhead piano teacher, was raped and suffered a mental breakdown from which she never recovered.

**We had to run for our lives**, and found shelter at the local hospital where my father now worked. We stayed there for seven days until it was safe to return home. When we returned to our house we discovered that it was completely ransacked. Whatever was not nailed down was taken, except for my mother's piano,

which was probably too bulky to be moved. My mother Anna wisely, had some gold coins and jewelry stashed away deep inside the piano. These gold pieces saved our lives later on.

On their move eastward, the combined German and Romanian troops occupied a large part of the Ukraine. The Germans then magnanimously "gave" the Romanians the stretch of land between the Rivers Dniester and Bug. This newly occupied land, formally annexed by Romania on August 19, 1941, became an artificial creation to be known as Transnistria (over the Dniester, in Romanian) for the next three years. By a decree from Marshal Antonescu all Jews from Bukovina and Bessarabia were to be deported to Transnistria into forced Labor Camps. The aim was to show allegiance to Hitler and to the Nazi espoused "solution" to the Jewish Problem. In October of 1941, all Jews of Vijnitz were herded to a ghetto in the vicinity of the local train station. The deportations to Transnistria then commenced. People were allowed to take only their personal belongings. Moreover, we had to be able to negotiate the baggage on our own and were compelled to drag it with us from then on.

#### **06. THE TRANSNISTRIA LABOR CAMPS (1941 - 1944)**

Chaos ranged in the ghetto while young and old, babies and disabled Jews were gathered and forced to wait for days on end out in the open. Most striking are my impressions of the indigenous people, jeering at us and calling us dirty names. Guards had to intervene in order to save us from harm. Finally, we were herded into boxed wagons that took us to Attachi on the Bessarabian side of the River Dniester. The train ride itself was grossly traumatic: people stuffed like sardines into these wagons, without light, food or any sanitary conditions whatsoever. Romanian gendarmes were all over to enforce the deportation orders in a rough and brutal manner.

There was a big bottleneck in Attachi at the crossing of the Dniester. The way across was to march over a very busy bridge or to ferry across the river on crowded barges. The choice was purely a matter of luck. Tens of thousands of Jews were forced to march across that bridge to Transnistria. We were lucky to be ferried across on a barge pulled by some of the very people who were being deported. Romanian gendarmes kept a close eye on us. There were stories of some Jews being wiped out before they reached the barge. The gendarmes then stole their meager belongings.

Upon crossing the Dniester we were led to an Armory in Moghilev, a central gathering and selection place. However, before reaching the Armory the Romanians ordered us to go through a "Custom House". A last minute search was made of each individual and any valuables they found were confiscated. It is amazing, therefore, that my parents were still able to retain some life-saving valuables.

**MOGHILEV.** Conditions at the Armory were abhorrent: overcrowding, no sanitary conditions, very little food, sleeping on the floor, misery and despair. People were segregated and marched to Labor Camps throughout Transnistria in order to make room for new arrivals. The roads were littered with corpses of those who could not take the ordeal. The very fit were sent out to the front lines behind the River Bug, to dig trenches for the Romanian and German Armies. They were never heard from again.

My family, comprised of my mother Anna, father Israel, brother Dov and I, along with my Grandparents BenZion and Fanie Koller, were forcefully marched along with hundreds of others to a Labor Camp called Tropova, some 30 miles east of Moghilev. On the way, my Bobbe and Zeide collapsed and had to be left behind by the wayside. They were then shot and dumped into a mass grave. We were forced to continue marching on and endure the pain of their demise.

**TROPOVA.** At last we reached the village of Tropova and were taken to a barracks complex - **THE CAMP** (or Lager). Conditions there were terrible. The heavy Ukrainian winter was upon us; there was no heat, we slept on cold floors, and had very little food to eat. Romanian gendarmes would appear at all hours, demand a roll call and pick up able-bodied people who were then sent out to join the forced labor brigades. During the winter, we were plagued with the scourge of a typhoid fever epidemic. It raged throughout the camps of Transnistria unchecked and devoured tens of thousands of Jews. The hygienic conditions were deplorable: no water, no bathrooms and no toilets. We lived jammed into overcrowded quarters, dirty and infested with lice, which just spread the disease. We had no doctor, nor medical supplies.

The typhoid fever eventually caught up with every one of us. The critical period for the disease is seven days. If you made it through that period, you were deemed saved. Many did not. While under the spell of high temperatures, typically 104, many people around us would hallucinate. To this day the expression of my playmate Selma Glickstern as she hallucinated, stays in my mind. She was lying on the gymnasium floor on a dirty mattress in a state of delusion. Selma and I grew up together. Her father Dr. Glickstern was one of my father's colleagues. Selma never made it, neither did her mother. Typhoid fever got me as well, and I miraculously survived, in large part due to my parents' care. They saved my life by wiping me down with cold water towels for days on end. This was one of several most trying periods of our existence.

**THE SHACK.** In mid-1942 there was a mild relaxation of conditions, when authorities realized that the supply of able-bodied people was exhausted. Roll calls became less frequent. Later that year, people were permitted to move out of the confined area and stay in houses forsaken by the Ukrainians or with local peasants who would accept us. We found a pleasant widow who took us in, in exchange for some of my mother's hidden jewelry

(taken from the piano). Her name was Nastasia. Her house was really a shack made of clay. There was no electricity and no indoor plumbing. The facilities were in an open-air latrine some 40 feet away from the house.

Fortunately, among the few belongings we had taken along with us, was a big bowl, a "schissel", packed in within a blanket. Keeping clean was an effort. We would frequently wash outdoors using the bowl, sometimes taking turns and using the same water, for water was a prized commodity. To fetch water from the village well was a very time consuming chore. In the winter we washed with snow. Due to the absence of public baths, the absence of soap and the lack of new clothes to change into, it made it really impossible to stay clean. One of our miserable pastimes was to de-louse each other. As a matter of fact, most of the Ukrainian peasants would have get-togethers with the sole purpose of de-lousing each other, while socializing and hulling sunflower seeds. The sunflower shells would be spewed all over the clay floor.

We had no beds to sleep on. I loved to crawl on top of the hearth, which was the centerpiece of the shack. The hearth served as the singular source of heat and it was the coziest spot to sleep on. It was heated with firewood and served as a stove and as a baking oven. Wood chopping and log splitting were chores that we all took turns at doing to keep the supply of firewood going.

**SURVIVAL.** Food was very scarce. The Ukrainian peasants exacted exorbitant prices for whatever food they had and it became customary for us to go to bed hungry. In desperation, my mother decided to try and use her knitting skills. But where would she get knitting needles? My father came up with an ingenuous idea: he took an old umbrella and ripped out the ribs to turn them into knitting needles. It worked! So my mother again was instrumental in keeping us alive. The peasants would supply her with their homespun sheep-yarn and she would knit sweaters,

shawls, caps.

Mother would barter her handiwork for bread, potatoes, eggs, onions and oil. One of our delicacies at the time was a small dish of chopped onions and oil. We would scoop up this mixture with old bread and enjoy. The reason for the old bread was that it would last longer... Once we got lucky, mother got a basketful of eggs, and we all learned how to drink raw eggs. It became my favorite breakfast, and I could drink down an egg by just piercing two holes on each side. After sucking out the content, I would sometimes put back the empty shell in the basket, as a joke...

In spite of the fact that my mother did excellent work for very little, there wasn't enough work to keep her busy continuously, or to keep our tummies full for too long. Work slowed down. To ameliorate the situation my father started to peddle soap to the peasants and barter it for food. He would make regular treks by foot to Moghilev, thirty miles away, to buy his supplies.

These were very dangerous trips, since they contradicted specific orders by the authorities to stay in the assigned quarters. If caught, he could have been prosecuted as a spy and faced certain death. On one of these trips my father got caught in a freezing rain. His shoes were worn through, with gaping holes, and the feet were wrapped in old newspapers in lieu of socks. His feet got wet and were covered with ice by the time he reached Tropova. Father was lucky that his feet did not freeze, but he wound up with serious foot problems that haunted him for the rest of his life.

During the potato harvest, my brother and I scoured the fields for left over potatoes to bring home. Mother would then prepare delicious potato soup for us.

**MARKO.** There was an old church in the center of Tropova, dilapidated since churches were banished during the Stalin era, and next to it the local cemetery. I used to hang out in the area on



Sundays and beg for handouts of food. At the time I was eleven years of age. On one such Sunday, dressed in what had become by then shabby clothes, and wearing a yellow Star of David, I approached a peasant woman on her way to the cemetery to visit her son's grave. The woman, who apparently pitied me, asked for my name, changed it to Marko and offered to give me some of the food she had with her. Thereafter, it became a ritual for quite some time: I would meet her at the cemetery on Sundays after church, and she would fill my pockets with all kinds of goodies to take home and share with my family. This act of kindness by a stranger left an indelible impression on me to this very day.

**MY FIRST JOB.** Sometime in 1943 I started to do real work; I got my first job! By then I was twelve years old, a teenager, and knew that my mission in life was to survive and help out as much as I can. I became a herdsman, accompanying a Ukrainian herdsman on the daily tasks of tending to a herd of cows. We took them to nearby fields for pasture, and I watched and helped steer the flock. By chance, I discovered that we were near an area cultivated with white sugar beets. Sugar beets were used by the local people to distill a home-brew of vodka and also for feed. When I brought back some beets, my mother used them to make a hearty soup that we all enjoyed. I then got into the habit of bringing home sugar beets as often as I could.

Unfortunately, my career as a herdsman was short lived. At some point, my only pair of shoes wore out and I opted to walking barefoot. That was fine for a little while. Well, one day I stepped on a rusty nail with my left foot. At first I told no one about it, to save my parents from aggravation. However, my foot became infected and began to swell up. It also became quite painful and I started to limp. Soon pus began oozing and gangrene was about to set in. I couldn't walk at all and had to stay in bed. The situation was very serious and I was in dire need of medical attention.

By sheer luck, the authorities finally acceded to sending a doctor to the Tropova Camp at about that very time. The doctor's name was Israel Chalfen. He immediately came to see me and went to work on my foot. It is safe to state that without his speedy intervention, I would have lost my foot if not my life. Although Dr. Chalfen had no medications (to the best of my knowledge), he was able to arrest the infection, clean and disinfect the wound and promote its healing. We befriended the doctor who quickly became our hero.

**THE PARTISANS.** Later that year (1943), rumors were abounding that the German and Romanian Armies were suffering defeats on the eastern front. There was some talk of Russian Partisan activity in our area that was finally proven true. The Partisans would make their entry at night and open grain silos. They usually helped themselves to the grain and then urged the peasants to do likewise. The grain was otherwise earmarked for Germany. The partisans would also hunt down collaborators and punish them. One morning we awoke and witnessed a spectacular sight that I will never forget. Bodies dangling in the blistering cold from ornamental trees in the center of the village. Such was the fate of some of the collaborators.

It was the spring of 1944; the sound of artillery could be heard from afar. At first the sound was faint, but then it gradually grew stronger and stronger. Later on, German and Romanian troops were seen retreating along the main road through Tropova. The Partisans forewarned us that in their retreat, these troops would hunt down Jews and kill them. My parents covered up the one window of the shack with a blanket and my brother and I hid on top of the clay hearth. We stayed there for a whole day. Later on we were told that a saddled Cossack collaborator rode by our shack, looked in, saw no sign of life and proceeded on his way. We were spared! Scores of Jews in Tropova were not as fortunate on that very day.

## 07. LIBERATION. RETURN TO CZERNOVITZ.

Our fears were finally allayed and our prayers came true, the Soviet Army had arrived. We were tired, exhausted, emaciated, left with broken hearts and sad memories, but a strong spirit and much hope.

We were still in Tropova on April 23, 1944, my birthday. This was not an ordinary birthday, but my thirteenth, my **Bar Mitzvah**. Surrounded by my parents and brother, I was made aware of the importance of the day and together we expressed our happiness to have survived the ordeal. We made it!

Confusion prevailed for some time. A couple of weeks had passed before we got word that Bukovina had been liberated. Father decided to head back by himself, explore the conditions and prepare for our return. He hitched a ride to Czernovitz on board a Russian military vehicle heading West that took him there. It was late May of 1944. As far as we could surmise, there was no desire on the part of the few returning survivors to venture back to the towns and villages from which they were expelled. The memories of the indigenous population cheering on and participating when calamity befell us were deeply imprinted in everybody's memory.

Father heard that a friend of his, Dr. Vijnitzer, was the director of the Jewish Hospital in Czernovitz. Since the new authorities decreed on not permitting "refugees" to return, Dr. Vijnitzer arranged for my father to be admitted as a patient. He then sent word to mother for us to join him.

Since we were broke, there was no alternative but to hitch a ride. Miraculously we reached Attachi. The journey from Attachi to Czernovitz was more memorable. We traveled by train on top of an open wagon loaded with logs. Soldiers, peasants, refugees, all shared this mode of transportation. No money, no tickets, no nothing - anarchy. We somehow made it!

Some of the Transnistria survivors followed the Soviet troops and succeeded in reaching Romania. We, however, were too exhausted, drained physically, mentally and emotionally and decided to camp in at Czernovitz at least for a while. Our ultimate goal was to get out of Europe. Most of the returning survivors also congregated in Czernowitz in lieu of any other refugee-friendly place.

**CZERNOVITZ.** Both my mother and father found jobs at the Jewish Hospital thanks to our good friend Dr. Vijnitzer. Father worked as a bookkeeper and mother as an office clerk. We were given very skimpy living quarters, that seemed nevertheless palatial compared with what we left behind. We had water, sanitary facilities and electricity to boot.

In the meantime the Russian authorities decreed that the liberated Bukovina was to remain an integral part of motherland Russia. In June 1944 the Soviets sealed the frontier. They regarded the deportees from Bukovina and Bessarabia (territories ceded to Stalin in June of 1940) as Soviet citizens. It seemed like we were being trapped and we did not like the idea. It is one thing to be liberated by the Red Army, and another to live under Soviet rule. We had a taste of Soviet rule in 1940 and did not enjoy it at all.

We therefore claimed Romanian citizenship and stated our desire to return to our "homeland". The answer to our prayers came in the late Spring of 1946, when the border was reopened for a short while to allow for several thousand Jewish refugees (that is, Romanian citizens that were trapped in Russia) to be repatriated to Romania. We were among those people.

**TWO YEARS UNDER RUSSIAN REGIME (1944-1946).** In the fall of 1944, my brother enrolled in a technical school to study to become a train engineer and I enrolled to the 5th grade of Middle School. Shortly thereafter another scare hit us. Dov was then seventeen and a

half years old and the Russians wanted to recruit him to the Soviet Army. A lot of pull was required to get him off the hook and to postpone the recruitment date.

The two years in what was now the Soviet Union were a repose from all the misery, sufferings and humiliation that we endured up to then. My school, called Middle School No. 18, was a Russian style Jewish school. Jewish in the sense that Yiddish was taught as an official language along with Russian. That was Stalin's way of making Jews feel comfortable, along with extolling the virtues of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidjan in East Siberia (that experiment did not last for too long and attracted only 22,000 Jews).

I enjoyed going to school and became one of a handful of best students in my class, both in fifth grade and in sixth grade. Yiddish literature was one of my favorite subjects, as I began to study the works of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem (Solomon Rabinovitch) and Isaac Leib Peretz. We also did school plays and gave public performances. I had a part in one of them, "The Kishifmachern" ("The Witch"), a play in Yiddish written by Abraham Goldfadden, a famous playwright and composer who lived in Czernovitz. He is best known for his song "Rojzinkes mit Mandlen", among others.

Among my other extra-curricular activities were playing chess and singing. The choir was the pride of the school. We gave concerts and appeared at the local radio station. Since tape recorders were unknown at the time in our area, we made regularly scheduled appearances at the station for live broadcasts. The songs were both in Russian and Yiddish.

Some of my buddies became life long friends. Among them Mordechai (Mutsiu) Tillinger and David (Doliu) Mehler. Both of them made successful lives for themselves and became very productive. They and their families live in Israel and we meet whenever we visit there. The three of us, coincidentally, married

English speaking spouses.

#### **08. REFUGEES IN ROMANIA (1946)**

The brief repose and the taste of relative normalcy did a lot to temporarily heal the wounds of Transnistria, at least superficially. Hidden scars, however, manifested themselves very frequently. These exhibited by distrusting strangers, being apprehensive when dealing with people in uniform, fearful of knocks on the door and keeping the window shades drawn.

Now the time had finally come to move on to the fulfillment of our long sought dream to get out of Europe. In the late spring of 1946, at the age of 15, I bid goodbye to my friends at the Middle School, to our friends at the Jewish Hospital and to Russian Czernovitz. We headed west to Communist Romania with the specific intent to leave that part of the world forever!

**COLENTINA.** I wound up in Colentina, near Bucharest, a Zionist preparatory place for youth (hachshara) to go to Israel. Life in Colentina was fantastic. We worked, studied and learned Hebrew, Zionism and Jewish History. This wasn't just plain work, but guided and supervised training. Evenings we sang Hebrew songs, danced the Hora and had discussion groups on Jewish national themes. Our leaders were skilled emissaries from Eretz Israel, very enthusiastic, knowledgeable and persuasive individuals.

My group was being readied to join a Kibbutz in the Upper Galilee. We corresponded with the people of the Kibbutz in order to bond and exchange some tidbits of information. I was chosen a group leader and as such, started to hold meetings and lead discussions, mainly on the political situation of the Yishuv. I can still remember our consternation with the British Labor Government and with Ernest Bevin, its Foreign Secretary, for their restrictive immigration policies for Jews and for siding with the Arabs. It was clear to us that

their policies were motivated by greed for Arab oil, and had nothing to do with justice or the lack of it. The tragedy was that it took Britain so long to come to terms with history and reality and to relinquish Palestine altogether. Political developments in the Middle East unfolded with lightning speed. The British Mandate was scheduled to be lifted on May 15, 1948. On May 14, David Ben-Gurion who headed the Jewish Agency became the first Israeli Prime Minister and proclaimed Israeli Independence as of midnight.

**GOODBYE EUROPE.** In Colentina, we were rapidly approaching the projected departure date to Israel. At that point my parents intervened. They were convinced that it would not be long before we all get permission to immigrate to the State of Israel. Their rationale was to stick together as a family on the voyage across the ocean. If I were to decide to join the Kibbutz there, then so be it. My counselors and my group on the other hand, implored me to stay with them, so we could make Alyah jointly as a well-trained group prepared for life in Israel. My parents' argument prevailed.

Our family received the one-way traveling documents to Israel in December of 1949. We renounced the Romanian citizenship and set out the same month on a boat voyage to the State of Israel. On boarding the boat we went through a custom check. To my complete dismay, my new collection of stamps was confiscated. This was a painful personal blow, since philately was a newly acquired hobby (started in Czernovitz in 1945) that I enjoyed immensely and my stamp collection was very dear to me.

### **09. WELCOME TO ISRAEL (1949)**

We arrived to the Port of Haifa in the middle of December 1949. How great was our happiness to be free at last! We were immediately sent to a Ma'abara, which is a transit or absorption center in Netanya. There we were met by my brother and Raia (by now his wife), as well as by my uncle Zvi. This was a very happy

reunion, especially since it was the first time that I met Uncle Zvi (my mother's brother). He invited us to visit him at his apartment in Tel Aviv. My parents later settled in nearby Ramat Gan.

My impression of Israel was fantastic. What a beautiful country! All Jewish! We finally left the Romanians, Germans and Russians behind us. No more anti-Semitism, no more concentration camps. I was euphoric and seemingly undergoing a complete spiritual reawakening. In essence all my optimism came through and the Israeli reality more than exceeded my wildest expectations.

**THE ISRAELI ARMY.** In April of 1950 at the age of 19, I was drafted into the Israeli Army. The first three months I underwent basic training, which was a completely new experience for me. It required a great deal of effort, since my physical activities in the past were limited. Suffice to say that I survived. The next step was a battery of IQ tests, which indicated that I have technical aptitudes. I was assigned to the Signal Corps and given an option to attend a nine months intensive training course in a technical school. The condition was to make up for school by extending my service by an equal amount of time. I agreed.

Going to technical school as a soldier was refreshing. The instructors were mostly British, which gave us another challenge. Added to the technical material that we had to digest on a daily basis, we had to learn another language: English. The workload was tremendous, but somehow I managed. As it turned out later on, all the equipment that we maintained and repaired was British, left over from the British Army. All the maintenance manuals were in English. At the end of the nine months training period I was assigned to the central repair facility of the Signal Corps near Tel Aviv.

Life became more normalized. I was able to visit my parents on weekends and meet with friends in the city. Meanwhile I rose to the



rank of Sergeant and was put in charge of a unit of technicians that maintained communications equipment on tanks and armored personnel carriers. The responsibility was very great, knowing that the life of soldiers may depend on the performance of this equipment in the field. Because of my expertise I was kept most of the time on the base, rather than being sent out. The proximity to Tel Aviv gave me another advantage. With the consent and encouragement of my senior commander, I enrolled in the Gordon Gymnasium on Gordon Street in Tel Aviv for courses leading to the external High School Diploma examinations. Completing my formal education was a major challenge, since I was deprived of going to school during the war years. The courses were quite demanding and required lots of concentration and hard work. I was determined to make up for lost time. By the time I was discharged from the army, I had earned my High School Diploma. My fellow soldiers/technicians in the Signal Corps honored me with a beautiful party and a special plaque from the Jewish National Fund. The plaque has an inscription stating that five trees were planted in the Defenders Forest outside Jerusalem in my name. That was the first honor I ever received.

All was well until I realized that without any further education there would be no promotions. I applied to the Haifa Technion, the only engineering school in Israel at the time and was rejected. The idea dawned on me that I might look for a school in America, especially since my Uncle Morris, my mother's brother, could sponsor me. It took some work to get through the bureaucracies and I was finally accepted to the New York Institute of Technology. I received my visa and in July of 1956 I was off to the United States with twenty dollars in my pocket. That was the maximum amount permissible in foreign currency at that time. My whole family saw me off at pier in the port of Haifa as I boarded a Zim liner for my voyage across the ocean.

## **10. EPILOGUE**

After surviving the Holocaust and getting rehabilitated in Israel, I arrived in New York on July 27, 1956 aboard a Zim liner at age 25. I was discharged from the IDF's Signal Corp with the rank of Sergeant and was committed to broaden my knowledge in the field of Electronics, thus making up for the loss of many years of schooling during WWII. The goal was to fulfill my dream of becoming an Engineer.

There was just one month left before the beginning of school and I had to move quickly. Where do I start? With the Yiddish Forward's classified ads, of course, since my English was quite poor at the time. I applied for a job as a night watchman at the Half Moon Hotel in Coney Island, which was then converted to a Jewish Home for the Aged. It seems that my qualifications were right and I was hired on the spot. The job paid a meager salary; however room and board were included. What a break!

Soon I found myself commuting from Coney Island to Manhattan, to the New York Institute of Technology. I did it for one year and became restless. Now that I had gained more confidence and my English had improved, I started to look for a job in the New York Times! There was an ad for an electronic technician at the flag store of the Lafayette Radio chain in Jamaica, Queens. Electronic kits were very popular in the 50's and 60's, and Lafayette Radio which sold these kits needed help to repair the defective ones. As luck would have it, I was interviewed by their Personnel Manager, an Israeli named Lenny Perlman, who liked my qualifications and hired me.

Suddenly, my life had changed. I switched from being a full time student to part time, taking classes at night and holding on to a full time job. I also started to make money, real money, moved to Jamaica and became active with the Israeli Student Organization in Manhattan. In the winter of 1958 we attended a Chanukah party at the William Shay High School given by the American Jewish Congress. A pretty blond girl was the hostess, who greeted me warmly and made a real

impression on me. We exchanged phone numbers and started to go out, meeting in front of Toffenetti's Restaurant on 44<sup>th</sup> street and Broadway. That girl, named Gloria Koss, from Brooklyn, became my wife on April 19, 1959.

Married life was full of challenges and I had to adapt to a new life style. Gloria was instrumental in helping me overcome many difficulties and encouraged me to grow and search for new opportunities. We moved to Kew Gardens, close to my engineering job with a company called Telectro Industries in Long Island City. Gloria commuted to Brooklyn, where she worked at the Beth El Hospital (now Brookdale) as Director of Volunteers Services. At night I continued with my studies towards an engineering degree.

In 1961 our daughter Naomi was born, which brought us much happiness and more challenges. We bought a house in Monsey, Rockland County, and continued our growth. I switched to a new job, as Project Engineer, with a company called Bogen Communications in Paramus, NJ, a company I stayed with for almost 20 years. I also continued with my studies, now at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where I earned a Master's Degree in Management Science. That paved the way to a big promotion as head of the engineering department or Vice President of Engineering. I served in that post for eight years until a leveraged buyout brought an end to the company.

Throughout all these years Gloria's and my commitment to Israel, which brought us together in the first place, never wavered. We subsequently made 16 trips to the homeland using our summer vacations to visit with family, friends and tour the country. To further reinforce the bond with Israel, our daughter Naomi Fishman and her family have now become regular visitors, and our granddaughter Arianna has just completed a four week stay there.

Currently, both Gloria and I are retired. We purchased a condominium in Mount Kisco, New York (Westchester County) and love our new

residence. We are close to our daughter Naomi Fishman, son-in law Adam and granddaughters Arianna and Liora. We enjoy the proximity to the Bet Torah Synagogue and participate in many of its activities. We also made numerous new friends.

**The phoenix rose from its ashes...and our transplanted Jewish tradition goes on.**

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This treatise is dedicated to the memory of my beloved parents, Anna and Dr. Israel Koller, who selflessly shielded me and my brother Dov from terror and despair during very perilous times. May their memory be a blessing to us all.

Mark Mordechai Koller

Mount Kisco, New York, June 26, 2008